DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 402 518 CG 027 311

AUTHOR Baldwin, Cynthia; Huggins, Don W.
TITLE The Feminist Perspective: Humanizing Research.
PUB DATE [95]
NOTE 18p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Experimenter Characteristics; *Feminism; *Humanization; Postsecondary Education; *Researchers; Research Methodology; Research Problems; Research Utilization; *Science Process Skills; *Scientific Attitudes; Scientific Methodology; Scientific Research; Thinking Skills

ABSTRACT

Although feminist perspectives about research have not been presented in a unified paradigm, feminist theory has helped to expose and demystify the empirical assumption of objectivity as the only way to truth in research. The feminist perspective in research represents alternate, non-oppressive formulations of what constitutes meaningful and valid knowledge and scientific practice. These paradigms honor the essential humanistic principles most often expounded within feminist and men's studies. This article answers basic questions about the feminist perspective and its impact on humanizing the empirical science paradigm, and specifically addresses ways in which the feminist perspective in research affects counseling. If truth is accepted as multifaceted and variable as the feminist perspective suggests, then the clean linear design structures of empiricism will eventually give way to a more complex and potentially more meaningful style of research. Contains 29 references. (Author/TS)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 402 518

The Feminist Perspective: Humanizing Research

by

Cynthia Baldwin, Ph.D.

Associate Professor

Counseling and Educational Psychology

University of Nevada, Reno

and

Don W. Huggins, M.A.

Sierra Nevada Job Corps Center

University of Nevada, Reno

Running head: Feminist Research

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

C. Baldwin

D. Huggins

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC).

2

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

CG027311

Abstract

Although feminist perspectives about research have not been presented in a unified paradigm, feminist theory has helped to expose and demystify the empirical assumption of objectivity as the only way to truth in research. This article answers basic questions about the feminist perspective and its impact on humanizing the empirical science paradigm. Implications for future research are also discussed.

The feminist perspective in the critique of scientific methods of research has challenged the basic assumption of objectivity in empirical research. What appears to be a belated emergence of scientific diversity in this century is due in no small part to our growing attention to these widespread feminist and non-empirical critiques of science. These critiques are exemplified by the writings of Merleau-Ponty (1963), Lyotard (1984), Foucault (1972), and the American Pragmatist Movement which is represented by the works of Rorty (1991). These authors have been highly influential within the more radical feminist criticisms of empirical science (Harding, 1991).

The feminist movement has been particularly instrumental in focusing on the shortcomings of empiricism in the social sciences (Lather, 1993; Harding, 1991). The limitations arising from the adherence to the ideology of empiricism especially in the social sciences become clear when seen through a multi-dimensional "feminist" perspective of reality. The purpose of this article is to answer a few basic questions about the feminist critique in research and examine its potential impact on humanizing current and future research methodology.

What is a feminist perspective of scientific research?

The feminist perspective in research represents alternate, non-oppressive formulations of what constitutes meaningful and valid knowledge and scientific

practice. It has been touted as revolutionary thinking (Bateson, 1972; Popper, 1982) and as promoting gender sensitive ways of understanding and knowing (Janson, 1989). These paradigms honor the essential humanistic principles most often expounded within feminist and men's studies. Although they do not constitute a single homogeneous feminist science, feminist critiques embrace a diversity of standards for scientific truth and validity (Lather, 1993; Lyotard, 1992; Visker, 1992). The shift that has become possible with the momentum of the feminist perspective in science has been away from one dominant correct paradigm of science (empiricism) to the coexistence of "equivalent, independent systems" of knowledge.

Some writers minimize the idea of a "feminist methodology" and believe that any method can be contaminated by theoretical blinders. Eichler (1988) suggested that there is no particularly feminist methodology because any way of performing science may be used in a sexist manner. From a similar perspective, Thompson (1992) suggested that any way of knowing or performing science can be done in a way that coincides with a feminist agenda.

How did the feminist perspective arise in research?

The feminist critique seems to have arisen simultaneously in several fields. Harding (1991) presented the notion that the development of feminist thinking and ways of knowing is due primarily to the changing social relations that support and

define what is considered valid knowledge and meaningful science. The commonality was their concern for the interests of women and other groups who were under-representated or misrepresented by common linear strategies in defining truth through research.

Sadowsky & Warren (1994) viewed alternate scientific approaches or "new sciences" as having derived from physics, molecular biology, and chaos theory. Others have suggested that the new sciences and alternate methodologies such as the feminist perspective have appeared out of revolutionary thinking within the biological sciences (Bateson, 1972; Popper, 1982). Flax (1990) attributes the growth of feminist interest in science to the adoption of emancipatory themes within Postmodern texts. From widely divergent fields, the feminist critique converged to one central theme relating to the tyranny of empiricism in the pursuit of truth.

Will a feminist perspective be incorporated into the practice of research?

The question remains whether or not gender relations in the West have changed sufficiently to allow the inclusion of feminist thinking into our scientific practice. Smith (1987) suggested that sociological research in particular remains primarily an androcentric (male centered) experience. Flax (1990) stated that along with the male-centered and male-dominated empirical methodologies, even some of our so-called alternate feminist methodologies remain within the scope of

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

empirical science. As such, they may perpetuate long standing prefeminist oppressive biases.

Other feminist authors have said that a feminist science is implausible, especially when it is attempted within a sexist social context (Rosser, 1988; Sprague & Zimmerman, 1993). Smith (1987) provided yet another perspective on the importance of defining ourselves through participation in the process of fashioning reality:

> "We (women) do not fully appreciate its (sociology's) authority, i.e., the right to author and authorize the acts and knowing and thinking which are the acts and knowing and thinking of the discipline as it is thought. We cannot therefore command the inner principles of our action. That remains lodged outside of us" (p. 91).

This notion of a multiplicity of knowledge and truth represented by the feminist perspective systems does not equate with solipsism (Visker, 1992). Monistic empirical theorists tend to view this "gender studies" position on diversity as naive idealism which results in a complicating or stalling of research which may lead to non-action (Sprague & Zimmerman, 1993).

What are the implications for future research?

The feminist perspective in research or the "new sciences" reject a sole

reliance upon the empirical search for universal social theories. This is because non-universal, localized truths constitute valid alternative ways of knowing. These new sciences need to provide alternatives to the disembodied and personally removed methodology of empirical science which merely denies or disguises the inevitable influence of the observer. Otherwise this influence stays suppressed or emerges in empirical research in a way that inevitably ignores at least some of the meaningful information of the researched (Smith, 1987). The new researcher will need to acknowledge that s/he engages in the social reality of the researched. This reality is not merely an object for study but instead is an unconditional datum to be encountered within a social relation between the researcher and the researched (Thompson, 1992). Within this dialogue, or within the exposure of differing perspectives, the social context of the researcher will necessarily have an impact upon the social reality of those who are researched (Sprague & Zimmerman, 1993).

A feminist researcher would begin with the actual experience of women and men, not a manufactured androcentric or oppressive socially defined experience (Harding, 1991; Smith, 1987). Having lost the possibility of a progressive unfolding of universal laws of an independent reality, research is left with the *merging* of constructions based upon human organizing capacities of the researcher and the constructed realities of the researched (Rorty, 1991).

Researchers will be set free to explore local truths of individuals and families (Lyotard, 1984). Researchers will be able to honor the needs of participants and deal with their practical issues of concern (Smith, 1987). This feminist perspective approach to research will promote ties with human purposes and values. The relation between the researcher and the researched is one of cooperation toward the goal of transformational praxis (McGinty, 1992, p. 5). Lather (1993) characterizes this style as an advocacy approach. Research thus approaches intervention (Polkinghorne, 1992).

Research within the New Sciences can recognize and value the language of the researched (Bliesner, 1994; Lather, 1993). This research starts from the position that there is likely to be a power differential between the researcher and the researched within their social relation. It is possible for this differential to result in the domination of the more powerful perspective and interpretation over the weaker. It is not necessary that power relations be sought out and avoided, nor is it necessarily desirable or possible (Foucault, in Bernauer & Rasmussen, 1988). If research is designed so as to protect the agency of the researched, however, the intervention can produce change that assists in the empowerment of the researched (Wylie, 1994). In a similar vein, Comstock (1994) suggested that "interpretive accounts of action, in contrast to causal explanations, take the form of practical inferences whereby acts are deduced from a knowledge of the

actor's intentions and conceptions of what must be done to accomplish those intentions" (p. 629).

These positions lead to yet another feminist concern regarding social science. If research contributes to the unfolding of social meaning and the researcher necessarily becomes politically involved with the researched, then it is imperative that a research design be made socially responsible for the uncovering of political oppression (Harding, 1991; Thompson, 1992). Some critical theorists suggest that all research must be geared toward emancipation (Gergen, 1992). In the case of gender research the androcentric bias (McNamee, 1988), or "dominator" bias (Eisler, 1987, p. xvii) inherent in our socially constructed knowledge should be revealed. A research program that continually deconstructs the language of gender and domination exposes the biases of the researcher and the researched, thus opening up alternate perspectives. Oppressive consequences of research can thus be avoided.

How does the feminist perspective in research affect counseling?

The feminist movement toward situated research seems to correspond with a call for research that may be meaningful to those whose professions require them to intervene in people's lives, e. g., counselors, psychologists, social workers, and other practitioners. These research goals and concerns suggest that we need to pursue knowledge for particular audiences, and of issues of concern to particular

individuals, families, and social groups; in other words, local knowledge rather than universal theories (Kvale, 1992; Murphy, 1989).

This may take us in the direction of a realignment of research and practice. Research that recognizes the necessity of the power dynamics of the researcher and the researched becomes practice (Foucault, 1972; Murphy, 1989). It becomes an intentional intervention in the lives of the researched (Harding, 1991). Foucault (1972) characterized psychotherapy as the practice of liberation from the constraints of one's limiting ideology. Gergen (1992) suggested that research can serve this same purpose, opening for individuals other possibilities and new thinking.

This realization does not necessarily lead to the shelving of quantification studies (Sprague & Zimmerman, 1993). Data collection may reveal social relations that would otherwise be hidden or transparent to the perspectives of the research participants (Smith, 1987). However, the position that research is intervention can further lead to the understanding that qualitative and dialogic pragmatic research can be more "scientific" and less offensive and oppressive to the participants. Feminist theory has demystified the status of objectivity. The sociopolitical agendas embedded in the language and practice of both quantitative and qualitative research must be addressed. Neither are necessarily suitable for feminist research (Thompson, 1992). The language of oppression and stereotyping

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

which is carried from the broader culture into our research strategies will have to be examined repeatedly.

Recent work on the deconstruction of gender exemplifies research that can be non-quantitative and liberating for the participants (Kvale, 1992). Gender refers to a socially constructed reality and as such the research that validates that social construction is doing so in an arena of power and oppression. If gender studies are performed with androcentric or dominator presuppositions, these biases will locate gendered differences that validate existing power relations. When we carefully examine the biases and methodology of the researcher we have a better chance of avoiding these oppressive practices. If we seek the local truths of the participants we empower heretofore unexpressed voices (Harding, 1991).

Deconstructive feminist research can be utilized with other dominant ideologies. Research into personality theory, mental health and illness, learning disabilities, child development and other important issues, can take on the task of uncovering hidden bias and further the conditions for personal and social development

Gender sensitive thinking on scientific practice is also likely to expand the range of what is allowable for research within the social sciences. (Gergen, 1992; Kvale, 1992). Psychology, for example, has been effectively sealed-off from socially valuable research by the narrow fixation on and demand for an

exclusionary empirical methodology (Bruner, 1990). As a consequence other disciplines within the social sciences have taken over much of what could be useful and valuable topics of study (Kvale, 1992).

The literature on feminist social science may serve as a wake up call for all of us. There are calls for the emancipation of women and men from the cultural limitations and constraints on our gendered ways of knowing and understanding. There are more calls for diversity in scientific research and practice. We are confronted by alternate views of reality and science. The resolution of the dichotomy between empirical reality and idealistic relativism may provide us with new tools. We may end up being more concerned with being useful than with being right. The feminine perspective in research can serve as a democraticizing force that will give voice to numerous marginalized peoples and cultures for whom the universal emancipation promise of the Enlightenment has failed.

Widely divergent responses to a feminist perspective in research leave one to speculate about the future of our paradigms of research. It is important to note that the rejection of the dominance of the empirical paradigm does not undermine science itself. Levine (1986) addressed this directly: "To acknowledge that fact (lack of a universal criterion for science), however, is not necessarily to assert that there are no forms of privileged knowledge. Rather it is to state that sincere adherence to a single criterion of the generally scientific is to commit oneself to a

polemical position that invalidates (silences) the legitimate claims of other kinds of knowledge. An alternative way to proceed would be to accept the notion of an irreducible plurality of privileged forms of knowledge" (p. 272).

In summary, if truth is accepted as multifaceted and variable as the feminist perspective suggests, then the clean linear design structures of empiricism will eventually give way to a more complex and potentially more meaningful style of research. This new methodological ground will have to be cultivated as new styles of perception challenge old standards of protocol. And the result will likely be a cross-fertilization of perceptions shaping a more diverse, inclusive and humanistic vision of truth.

References

Bateson, G. (1972). Steps to an ecology of mind. New York: Ballantine.

Bliesner, R. (1994). Feminist perspectives on friendship: Intricate tapestries. In D.S. Sollie & L.A. Leslie (Eds.), Gender, families, and close relationships (pp. 120-141). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Bruner, J. (1990). Acts of meaning. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Comstock, D.E. (1994). A method for critical research. In M. Martin & L.C. McIntyre (Eds.), Readings in the philosophy of social science. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Eisler, R. (1987). The chalace and the blade. San Francisco: Harper.

Flax, J. (1990). Psychoanalysis, feminism, and postmodernism in the contemporary West. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Foucault, M. (1972). The archaeology of knowledge (A.M. Sheridan Smith, Trans.). New York: Pantheon. (Original work published 1969).

Gergen, K.J. (1992). Toward a postmodern psychology. In S. Kvale (Ed.), Psychology and postmodernism (pp. 17-30). London: Sage.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Harding, S. (1991). Whose science? Whose knowledge? Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Jansen, S.C. (1989, May). Feminist materialism: The challange to dialogically-based theories of democracy. Paper presented at the meeting of the International Communication Association, San Francisco, CA.

Kvale, S. (1992). Postmodern psychology. In S. Kvale (Ed.), Psychology and postmodernism (pp. 31-57). London: Sage Publications.

Lather, P. (1993). Critical frames in educational research: Feminist and post-structural perspectives. Theory into Practice, 31, 87-99.

Levine, D.N. (1986). The forms and functions of social knowledge (pp. 271-283). In D.W. Fiske & R.A. Shweder, (Eds.), Metatheory in social science. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Lyotard, J. (1984). The postmodern condition: A report on knowledge (G. Bennington & B. Massumi Trans.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Lyotard, J. (1992). The postmodern explained (J. Pefanis & M. Thomas, Trans.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

McGinty, S. (1992). Ethical issues in constructing the researcher self: A feminist influenced debate. Paper presented at the

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, CA.

McNamee, S. (1988). Breaking the patriarchal vision of social science: Lessions from a family therapy model. (Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- information Analysis).

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1963). The structure of behavior (A.L. Fisher, Trans.). Boston: Beacon Press. (Original work published 1942).

Murphy, J.w. (1989). Postmodern social analysis and criticism. New York: Greenwood Press.

Polkinghorne, D.E. (1992). Postmodern epistemology of practice. In S. Kvale, (Ed.), Psychology and postmodernism. London: Sage.

Popper, K. (1982). The open universe: An argument for indeterminism. Otowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield.

Rorty, R. (1991). Essays on Heidegger and others. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rosser, S.V. (1988). Good science: Can it ever be gender free? Women's studies International Forum, 11, 13-19.

Sadowsky, S. & Warren, B.A. (1994, January, Revised: April, 1994). Rethinking extension work: Lessions from the new sciences. Paper presented at the Program Leadership Committee of ECOP-ES-USDA, Wisconsin.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Smith, D. (1987). Women's perspective as a radical critique of sociology. In S. Harding, (Ed.), Feminism and methodology: Social science issues. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Sprague, J. & Zimmerman, M.K. (1993). Overcoming dualisms: A feminist agenda for sociological methodology. In P. England, (Ed.), Theory on gender/feminism on theory. New York: A. de Gruyter.

Thompson, L. (1992). Feminist methodology for family studies. Journal of Marriage and the Family, 54, 3-18.

Visker, R. (1992). Habermas on Heidegger and Faucault: Meaning and validity in the philosophical discourse of modernity. Radical Philosophy A Journal of Socialist & Feminist Philosophy, 61, 15-22.

Wylie, A. (1994). Reasoning about ourselves: Feminist methodology in the social sciences. In M. Martin & L.C. McIntyre (Eds.), Readings in the philosophy of social science. Cambridge: MIT Press.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE